MAINE AUDUBON

Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs
c/o Office of Fiscal and Program Review
5 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333

April 27, 2023

RE: LD 212, *An Act to Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue to Upgrade Municipal Culverts at Stream Crossings*

Dear Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, and Members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee:

My name is Francesca "Ches" Gundrum and I am Maine Audubon's Policy Advocate. Maine Audubon is the state's oldest and largest wildlife conservation non-profit – we fulfill our mission to "conserve Maine's wildlife and wildlife habitat" by engaging people of all ages in nature through a science-based approach to education, conservation, and advocacy. On behalf of Maine Audubon and our 30,000 members, supporters, and volunteers, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of LD 212, *An Act to Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue to Upgrade Municipal Culverts at Stream Crossings.*

LD 212 would authorize bonding to enhance and restore rivers, streams, and fish and wildlife habitats and to allow communities to better prepare for extreme storms and floods. Additional investment in Maine's stream crossing infrastructure like larger, upgraded culverts will have significant benefits for Maine's wildlife and habitat because surveys show that most existing culverts pose some kind of barrier for fish and wildlife.

- Water resources are vital to Maine wildlife. 85% of species either live in aquatic habitats throughout their lives or use these aquatic habitats or the habitat adjacent to them throughout the course of a year to find food, water, breed, and travel.
- Surveys of culverts around the state have found that nearly 90% of culverts pose a barrier for fish and wildlife at some part of the year or the animal's life cycle, and about 40% are severe barriers.

- Barriers are most frequently caused by a culvert that is too small and has concentrated the water flowing through it (like water through a hose), creating a scour pool downstream resulting in a perched culvert. Moving through a culvert like this requires a swimming or leaping ability that not all fish or wildlife have.

Two of Maine's iconic cold water fish species, the Eastern Brook Trout and federally endangered Atlantic Salmon, are particularly at risk – access to much of the high quality habitat for them is limited by undersized culverts. This can have a significant effect on the long-term economy of Maine.

- Fishing is the most popular outdoor sport in Maine with over 260,000 recreational anglers, generating $100 million in wages and salaries, $200 million in retail sales, and $20 million in tax revenue. Stream fishing is an important mainstay in many rural economies throughout the state.
- Replacing undersized culverts can reconnect stream habitat, allowing reoccupation of habitats cut off by poor crossing structures. It also increases survival by allowing fish to reach cold water during the heat of summer, spawning habitat for reproduction, and feeding habitats throughout the year.

For local municipalities, this bond would provide an opportunity to protect roadway infrastructure and public safety in the face of likely increases in the severity and frequency of storm events.

- Undersized culverts put roads at increased risk of washout, creating serious safety and financial hazards. Road washouts endanger motorists and can cut areas off from emergency services.
- The cost of fixing a washed out road can be many times greater than the cost of upgrading a culvert to prevent a washout.
- Based on data collected from 1948-2011 at more than 3,000 weather stations, it is estimated that Maine will see a 74% increase in the frequency of extreme storm events and a 23% increase in size in the largest annual storms.

In light of these issues, Maine Audubon, in collaboration with a large group of state, federal, and nongovernmental partners, launched a program called Stream Smart, which organizes workshops to train road professionals on how and why to install and replace culverts with science-based solutions.

- Stream Smart solutions let the stream act like a stream, last longer than undersized crossings, reduce the risk of road washouts, and save money in the long run.
- The concept of creating rightly-sized road/stream crossings is one that is easily understood and strongly supported by workshop attendees.
- The primary difficulty faced in actually implementing culvert upgrades, as expressed at these workshops, is the upfront cost.

Since 2015, the Maine Department of Environmental Protection has managed the Municipal Stream Crossing Upgrade Grant Program. The grants fund the upgrade and replacement of stream crossings throughout Maine, utilizing Stream Smart criteria. The grants match local funding. Traditionally, grant funds have come from bonds, though funds have also come from the state budget through Governor Mills' Maine Jobs & Recovery Plan. In addition to the challenges of upfront costs, Maine Audubon staff have also heard a desire for stable, predictable funding. Like our workshop participants, we would like to see this program access long term funding so that municipalities can plan ahead – either to build the resources they need to apply for a grant or reapply if they have not been selected in a previous round.

Funding for municipal culvert replacement and upgrade would ensure funds for the upfront costs of these needed infrastructure improvements across Maine; help communities prepare for extreme storms and flood events; conserve wildlife and wildlife habitat for future generations of Maine citizens; and allow the state to access federal funds through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

We encourage the Committee to fund this important work and these important opportunities. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Francesca "Ches" Gundrum
Policy Advocate